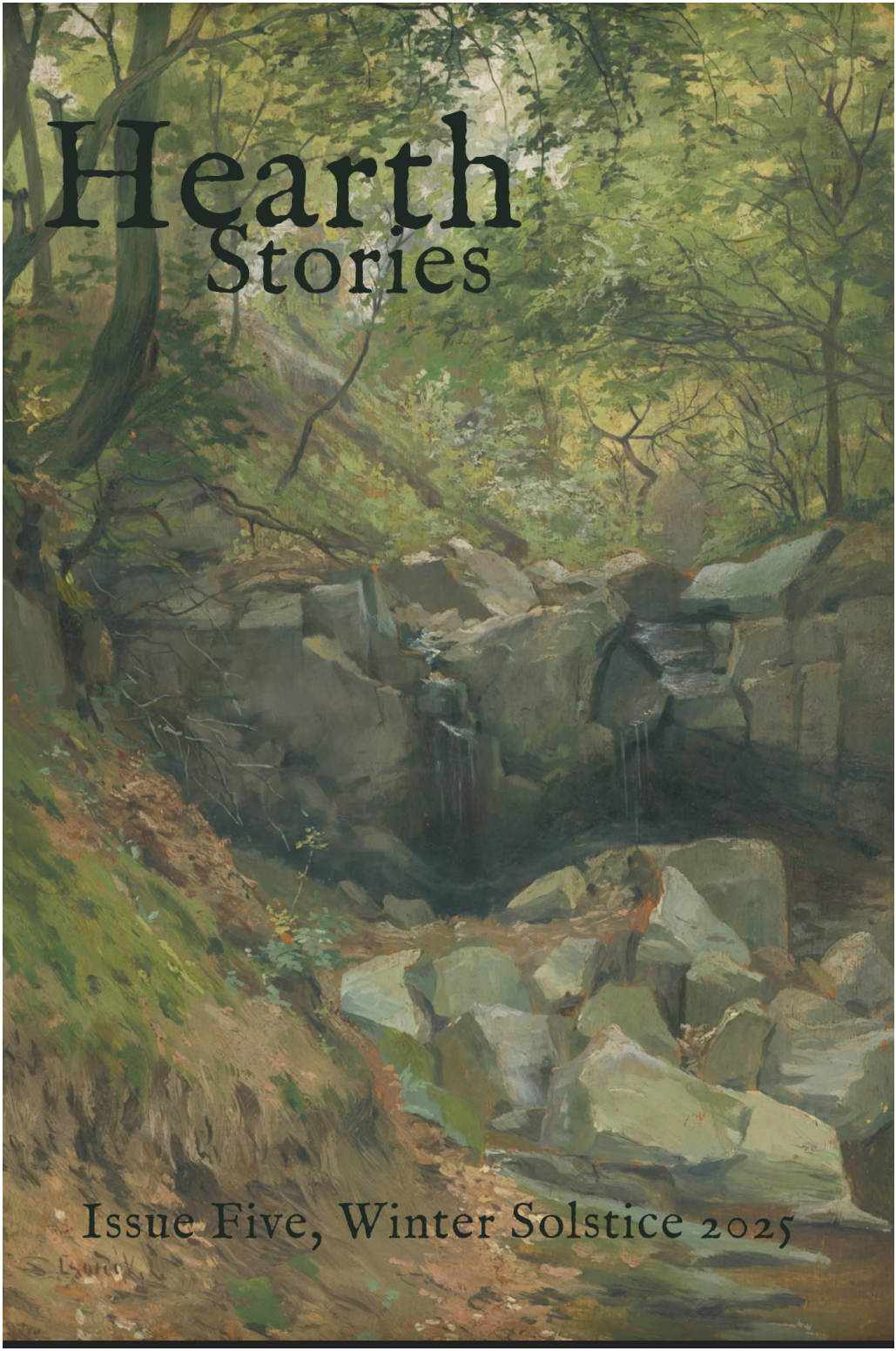
Hearth
Stories
Issue Five, Winter Solstice 2025

Hearth Stories

Hearth Stories is a digital speculative fiction magazine exploring connection, family, relationships, comfort, and the natural world. For more information, please visit hearthstories.org.

Produced and Edited by Sloum.

A Letter from the Editor

By the time you read this, it will be winter. Autumn in the mountains this year has been strangely warm. Most years we have had a bit of snow by now. I wonder what the winter will be like—as I do most years. It seems to be looking mild. Almost all of the leaves from our cherry tree have fallen, while the apple still has some leaves and old apples clinging to it. The robins, towhees, and chickadees will enjoy the apples as winter's spareness envelopes the mountain. I, in turn, will enjoy watching the birds from the warmth and comfort of the big window by the table.

2025 has been an odd year for me. Last winter was full of illness. The rest of the year had a mix of illness and injury, both of which have been stubborn. That said, I have read some wonderful books: *Hild* and *Menewood* by Nicola Griffith and *Matrix* by Lauren Groff come to mind as standouts that I highly recommend. I have also been finger loop braiding, tablet weaving, and hand sewing a few projects. The piano also continues to be a big part of my life and much of

this year has been spent learning a small handful of traditional English/Irish/Scottish folk tunes to sing and play. I always feel so fortunate that I have the arts in my life.

You may notice that this issue is a bit shorter than is often the case. As the magazine has gone on we have moved closer to our vision for the magazine. That has seemingly reduced the number of submissions we receive that fit that vision. So many wonderful stories get sent our way that just aren't quite what we do. We will likely be moving forward with issues of around five stories (or four and a poem, as seen here). In the long term this will prove more sustainable for us over a longer period of time.

This issue sees us continue with enchanting stories of woods and wanderers, family and found family, and journeys and the stories that are told of them. As ever, I hope you enjoy these stories and that they bring some warmth to your winter—or whenever you find yourself reading them.

—Sloum, Editor

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Sky

By Catherine Yeates

They sprang forth from icy mud beneath the cottonwood tree, mind brittle with shadows, breaking through the thin, frozen surface of the mire. Above the ground, they found form in body; filaments knitted together, forming skin, forming eyes. Lingering mycelia drew moisture from the ground, forming blood. When their heart began to beat, they knew cold for the first time, and with it, fear.

For two decades, they had grown beneath the soil, their hyphae wound among the roots of their tree, their mycorrhizal birthplace. Leaves fallen from abundant branches had built a rich, dark soil. The trunk reached toward the sky, shielding them from the blinding whiteness of winter.

With their hands on the trunk, they sensed the cottonwood's pulse only faintly. The ice splintered and cracked beneath their feet as they stumbled through primordial mud. They circled the tree, spotting the gap in the branches. A thread of decay run-

ning up from a gash in the trunk, a sharp cut of lightning.

You must go, the tree said. *I am growing weaker.*

But I want to help you, they said. *With these hands, maybe I can.*

Build a new life for yourself with your hands, the tree said. *Go.*

They drew their remaining threads and filaments from the earth, forming soft fabric to clothe themselves as the people who lived above the ground did. The winter was cold, and they spent their first night among the trunks of four fallen spruces, sleeping beneath a mat of warm underbrush, with a pillow of soft chips of wood.

An old barn marked the southern threshold of the forest. They peeked through its broken windows, where the inside smelled sickly sweet, like fruit rotting on the vine. The empty stairs creaked as if under the weight of invisible walkers. Hulking shapes lay rusting outside, covered in remnants of hungry plants that rose each summer to bite off more of the metal. Beyond the barn were rolling hills, miles of green extending across the horizon.

They halted there at the tree line. They had never seen the horizon before, and their stomach flipped at the immensity of it, vast and blue. But there were no worn paths, no distant smoke rising, no signs of the people above the ground. They clung to the outskirts of the forest, following the trees northeast. When a

dirt trail appeared, they took it across a low sloping hill to a valley filled with cottonwoods. Beneath their shade stood a cottage with white smoke rising from its red brick chimney.

Inside the home, a pot of stew bubbled over the fire. They sniffed, never having known such food. It was rich and hearty, and they drew nearer. Then there was a creak as a woman emerged from the cellar under the cottage. Her face was lined and her hands that gripped a pair of glass jars were wrinkled, but her hair was red as the bricks of the chimney.

"Are you one of the tree spirits?" she asked.

They shook their head and pointed to the roots at the base of the nearest cottonwood.

"Ah, one of the people from under the ground. Don't see many of your folk. First time above?"

"Yes," they answered, the word forming awkwardly in their mouth.

"So you speak."

"Learned words from the trees. The cottonwoods are old. They've met many travelers. Spoken with many people."

The woman's eyes were bright as she hummed. "I've spoken with the trees. They've sheltered me and provided for me for many years, and I would do the same for their kin. Tell me, would you ask me to grant you shelter?"

"If you are willing."

"I am."

Geraldyne was her name, though she supposed they could call her Gran. "I have a granddaughter about your age," she said. "My son moved west some twenty years ago, across the plains. His family visits every fall. He tries to get me to live near them, but I love these woods too much to leave."

She knew the trees; some had shown her the shiny, reddish-brown mushrooms she used to make her tinctures, while others pointed her toward the best groves to forage.

On a clear morning, they asked Gran to follow them into the forest, to their cottonwood. Gran gazed up in wonder as light spilled down like spring rain. "This is a venerable old tree." But she put her hands on the trunk and shook her head. "The lightning's gone through the heart; there's not much we can do. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"This is my home; I want to help," they said.

"What does the tree want you to do? Visit, yes, but not mope. You come from the ground; you understand that everything goes back to the ground."

They laid their hands upon the trunk and remembered the darkness of the soil. Their years in the cradle of the cottonwood's roots. Of speaking with the tree, of its long memory, years counted in the rings of its trunk. And they all would return to the soil, but the tree had never truly left it. The tree whispered, *It will be alright.*

Gran patted the trunk and then turned back to them. "You don't have a name, do you?"

"No."

"Then I suppose you can pick one that suits you."

As winter turned to spring, the snowdrops and crocuses burst through the thin ice. Gran retrieved a stack of books from her shelves, along with a thick booklet of paper.

"I don't imagine the trees taught you your letters and numbers, did they?"

They shook their head.

"Most of our folks learn them when young, but not all. It doesn't matter if you're a quick study; reading and writing are worthwhile whenever you learn them."

They accepted the books, and slowly they learned to read them. Gran recited the names of the flowers outside: lily of the valley, hyacinth, and daffodil. They took the paper and pencils out to their tree and practiced the word cottonwood. They leaned against the trunk, and the branches rustled in a greeting. But many of those branches remained bare even as the spring wore on, and the trunk developed a definite lean to the right. When they dug into the earth to touch the roots, they felt the decay spreading out through them.

Do not worry, the tree said. *You are doing just fine.*

As the weather grew warmer, Gran spent her days in the tidy greenhouse beside the cottage, starting

seeds of snapdragons, petunias, and impatiens. When the last frost passed, she planted them in the wooden boxes adorning the fence. Dappled sunlight filtered through the canopy as she sat with her small shovel, her fingers encrusted with soil.

"My son brings seeds and bulbs every year," Gran said. She paused, a curious expression on her weathered face. "What was your life like under the earth? Could you see above the ground?"

"Not like this," they said. "Not with colors and sounds and smells. I could sense—I knew when people traveled through the forest. The trees would speak with them. Sometimes they would camp in the woods and their conversations would last for days and days. I was quiet around people. They can't see us under the ground, down by the roots, you know."

"I'm afraid they might not recognize you as a person in that form." She dusted the dirt from her hands and glanced at the surrounding cottonwoods. "Your folk, they aren't as common as the trees, are they?"

"We are rare. I am the only one I know in these woods."

"Did that make you lonely?"

"No. I had my cottonwood, and I could feel far beyond it. I often spoke with the other cottonwoods in the forest, as well as the oaks and ashes, and the old cherry tree on the far west side. Through them, I learned many things about this world." They leaned closer. "The trees see more than people realize," they said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Gran laughed. "I've always assumed the birches could see, covered in all those eyes. But I'll have to keep that in mind."

As summer began, brilliant orange daylilies emerged, and the peonies unfurled layers of white petals. Gran picked a heavy book and demonstrated how to press the flowers between its pages. Then she brought out a pair of wicker baskets, and they headed into the forest together.

In the cottonwood's grove, Gran busied herself gathering dandelion roots while they picked delicate elderberry flowers to remind them of their old home, nestling them gently within the book. The cottonwood's branches creaked a faint greeting. It was difficult to deny that their tree's strength was waning, but they sat among the roots and told the tree of their progress with reading and writing all the same. When Gran had finished gathering burdock nearby, she carefully looked the tree over, an unreadable expression etched into her face.

"Come," she said. "We should finish foraging so it won't be midnight before dinner is ready."

Gran plucked bright yellow chanterelles from the ground and oyster mushrooms off an old stump. Once they were back at home, she chopped the roots along with carrots and potatoes from the garden and added them to a huge pot, where the richly colored vegetable stock she made yesterday was already bubbling. They helped Gran mince garlic and sear the

mushrooms in a cast iron pan before adding them to the pot and letting the mixture simmer into a savory stew.

The next week, the birch trees whispered that there were people in the forest. Gran met them on the road outside the cottage. The merchants opened the side of their cart to reveal colorful boxes and jars and all manner of unnamable trinkets. Gran traded her tinctures for new glassware to use for canning fruit and a few more books as well.

In the garden, the peaches and plums were ripe and juicy, weighing down the branches of their trees. Gran stood on the ground while they climbed the ladder with a basket in hand, filling it with fruit. When Gran left for the kitchen, they stared up into the clouds that covered the sun. They hadn't seen the clouds or sun when they lived deep in the earth. They knew the sun's warmth, its sustaining force that filled their cottonwood with life. And they knew the clouds' rains, washing the ground with cool water, filtering down through their web of mycelia, soaking into their tree's roots. But they didn't know the sky. They stared up at it with fascination, as though seeing it for the first time since they broke through the ground.

"Sky," they said. They climbed down the ladder and poked their head into Gran's kitchen.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

"You can call me Sky."

Gran smiled back at them. "That's a lovely name."

"I'm going to tell the cottonwood," they called as they ran into the forest. Their feet tapped against the path, and the wind rushed through their hair; beneath them, they felt the earth and the network of roots connecting the trees.

They spread their arms across the cottonwood, holding it close. "I am Sky," they said. "Call me Sky, the place your branches touch."

The cottonwood was silent, its branches still in the summer air.

"Cottonwood?" They ran their fingers through the ridges of grayish brown bark. When no reply came, they sank to the ground and rested their cheek against its roots.

Autumn arrived, and the leaves burned red and yellow, filling the wind and crunching beneath their feet. They harvested squash and corn and roasted them over the fire. Gran spent weeks canning and counting the number of jars in the root cellar.

When they lived beneath the cottonwood, they'd known the cold months as a time of rest. Above-ground, there was an edge of uncertainty to the rush of preparation for winter. They dressed in thicker clothes to keep the chill out and piled extra quilts onto their bed. Sometimes when they lay down to sleep, they imagined they were still resting in the quiet of the earth, where life was slower and simpler. Other evenings, they sat in front of the fireplace,

reading books and wondering at the vastness of the world beyond the cottonwood's grove.

One night, they sat awake in bed as lightning rent the clouds over the vast plains and thunder wracked the cottage. Far away, there was a sharp crack. Sky draped the quilt over their shoulders as they tiptoed into the living room, where Gran still sat in her plush chair beside the fire. Wordlessly, Sky lay down upon the couch and watched the fire dance.

In the morning, they headed into the woods with Gran. The path was muddy and dotted with puddles. As they reached the cottonwood's grove, their eyes darted to the open space in the canopy. Blue sky, where leaves had once been, sun raining down where lightning had struck. Dead roots protruded from the ground, upended, with clumps of dirt sprayed across the grass. The cottonwood lay there, silent and still.

"Gone," Sky said. "It's gone."

"Back to the earth."

"It was my home."

"I know," Gran said. "And the cottonwood will always be a part of you. Just like you were woven through the earth among its roots. But you can belong to the sky and the earth, and you can be a part of my family as much as you are a part of the forest."

Sky looked at Gran, and the woman's expression was earnest. They wrapped their arms around her, hugging her tight like the cottonwood's roots had held them, gentle and strong.

"You'll be alright," Gran said, and they walked the path through the forest, back to her cottage. They paused at the top of the hill, where the grass

stretched far as they could see and the sky reached down to touch them with its autumn breeze. Across the plains, a carriage broke the distant line of the horizon. It drew nearer, and the man behind the reins waved.

Gran smiled. "That's my son and his family. They'll be happy to meet you."

Sky waved back, their hand swaying in the air like the branches of the cottonwood.

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Catherine Yeates is a writer, artist, and former neuroscience researcher. Their work has been published in *Wyngraf*, *Hearth Stories*, and the *Solarpunk Creatures* anthology. They live with their partner, cat, and two rambunctious dogs.

Q&A with Catherine Yeates

The following questions were posed by Alicia Adams, author of *Datura of the Desert*, and are answered by Catherine Yeates about their story *Sky*.

I was delighted to see that you also have gone down the rabbit hole of mycology and communication networks within forests. It's one of my favorite topics! I was so intrigued by the idea of (essentially) fungus rising from the ground, leaving this underground network, and taking human form. Are there any folktales, stories, or ideas that inspired the type of being that Sky is?

> I've been increasingly interested in fungi over the last few years, especially the relationship between mycorrhizal fungi and trees. This story came from a combination of that interest and a specific mental image I had of someone bursting up through the ice in a forest. The back acre behind my childhood home tended to flood as

> snow melted and then refroze. I used to go walking around on the ice as a kid and would frequently fall through it and soak my shoes. So, I thought about what kind of being might live down by the tree roots and worked from there.

I love how different the world must seem from underground than above it. Sky might have been familiar with daffodil bulbs but not the flowers. Gran teaches them about the world all over again from this new perspective. In your fiction and your visual art, are you drawn to exploring different perspectives or looking at the world in new ways?

> My academic background is in neuroscience, and sensory systems were a big topic of study in my coursework. Learning about different types of sensory processing has strongly influenced my fiction. I started thinking more about how our brains create our experiences. We might view our sensory and cognitive experiences as normal and cohesive because they're familiar, but other people can have vastly different experiences. I'm especially interested in exploring that in speculative fiction.

I'm always impressed when stories about grief still manage a level of coziness. The sunlight and caring from the cottonwood can't be replaced, but Gran's cooking and teaching and kindness offer their own kind of comfort. How do you find balance between

sweetness and sadness? Do you find that grief and loss are well suited to cozy stories?

> This story is one of the few I've written where I had a very clear idea about the opening. Although I knew I wanted the story to be cozy overall, I also wanted it to start with this sense of cold, confusion, and loss. There's something about the cold, especially snowy forests, that I feel can either be harsh and lonely or cozy and comforting. Or sometimes all those things at once. That perspective informed the rest of the story. I wanted to write about someone experiencing a transition in their life and the complicated emotions that go with it. Ultimately, I find that as long as your characters have hope, you can deal with difficult topics and still come out with a cozy story.

There's so much to talk about with this story. Is there something particular you'd like to speak to that I haven't asked?

> I'm very interested in writing about people who act as guardians or lighthouse keepers for the realms where they live. In this case, it's Gran, who immediately welcomes Sky. I like the idea that even if you end up in a strange place, you can find someone who's willing to help you. It was especially fun for me to write a non-binary character whose life has been very different from that of humans and to let them experience

the human world through cozy things like food, comfort, and familial relationships.

Datura of the Desert

By Alicia Adams

This story is the fifth installment of an ongoing series of interrelated stories that is being serialized by Hearth Stories, beginning with "Dandelion" in Issue One.

Clover had heard of the traveler from Hollyhock, who was the physician's apprentice. The traveler had sprained her ankle coming through the fen and was resting up and healing in Rosemary's tree. "She'll probably only stay a few days until the swelling goes down," Hollyhock said. "But you'll want to talk to her before she goes. She's been traveling her whole life, and she's bound to have good stories."

Clover thanked her friend and hugged her before running back home to gather tea and applesauce to make her visit.

"But you already have a story for the fall festival," Dandelion said as she watched Clover gather teacups and spoons into a basket. "I've heard you practicing."

"Don't listen!" Clover said. "I want the story to be a surprise, even for you."

"I know, but I love listening to you practice."

Clover blushed. "Please, promise you won't listen. I want you to be surprised at the fall festival. I want you to experience it with everyone else."

"Fine. I promise I won't listen." Dandelion added the jar of applesauce to the basket. "I hope you get a good story today."

The heat was already starting to recede from the forest, and the wind that blew through the pine needles had the first bite of cold. Clover had already practiced three stories for the fall festival, but none of them were right. None of them made you stay up during the night wondering about them. None of them were warm enough to keep the settlement going through a hard winter. They were fine, but Clover was looking for something great. This was her contribution to the community, and she took it seriously.

Clover found Alyssum in the healing tree, lying on one of Rosemary's many beds, her ankle wrapped and elevated with a cool cloth set over it. She had sun-browned skin lined with wrinkles and long ashen hair. "Hello," the traveler said in a high, thin voice. "You must be Clover."

"How did you know?"

"Rosemary said you would come. She said you're drawn to good stories like robins to the morning."

Clover laughed, pleased with the comparison.

"And you must be Alyssum, the traveler. I've brought you some things to make your stay more comfortable. I hope you like spice tea and apple-

sauce." There was already a kettle of hot water beside Alyssum's bed, another sign that Clover had been expected.

"That would be lovely, dear. So, you've come to hear my stories?"

"I hoped you'd share one with me. I'll be sharing a story at the fall festival in a month's time."

Clover set out the cups, and Alyssum filled them with the steaming water. "You'll want to hear about Datura," she said with a wink.

"Anything you'll share with me."

"Even with all my travels, my best stories come from the desert, where I was born and lived my childhood years. Likely you've never even heard of the desert."

Clover shook her head.

"In the summer it's so hot you can hardly go outside. In the winters the nights are cold and bleak. It's a place of extremes. Instead of soil, there's sand as far as the eye can see. The plants are different there. Trees are rare. Mostly the plants are low and scrappy, covered with thorns or spines. But in the spring, the bright flowers rival the beauty of anywhere else I've seen.

"Datura's house was part of the children's route, so we saw her once a week. She seemed so old to me, though she was probably half the age that I am now. She had short copper hair and was paler than the rest of us. She spent most of her time tucked away in her little withered cactus home, not talking to anybody.

"A cactus is a type of plant," Alyssum clarified. "It has thick green walls and sharp spines. It's filled

with water, usually, but when they die they make good homes.

"I remember her home so clearly." She looked off into the distance as she spoke, as if looking across the miles and years and into the dwelling itself. "She had few possessions. Kept all her food tucked away in chests, but when you opened them the food was in disarray. The few things left out were always turned over on their sides. It seemed to us kids like she just walked around her house knocking everything over. You could bring a fresh prickly pear to her house one day, and by the next it would be bruised.

"I went over to her little house once a week with the other children to bring her food and water and to check on her health. And whenever we came over, she let us in, as was customary, and asked us how our days were and how our families were and how things were in the settlement. But she asked in a distracted way, never looking at us, smiling through clenched teeth."

Clover set down her tea, leaning in.

"It was so strange, so uncomfortable," Alyssum continued, "that finally I begged my mother not to make me go. *We can just leave the things on her doorstep*, I said.

"But my mother wouldn't hear it: *Alyssum, this is non-negotiable!*" Alyssum deepened her voice and waved her finger in the air as she spoke her mother's parts. *"You are ten years old now, and you know what your responsibilities are. Your community takes care of you, and you take care of your community."*

"*But Ma!* I whined. *She doesn't want us there anyway.*

"*How do you know that? Did she tell you?*

"*No.*

"*Then I don't want to hear another word about it.*"

Clover chuckled and blew the hot steam from her tea as the drink steeped.

"But I was a stubborn child. I was convinced that Datura would be happier alone. And if my mother wouldn't listen to reason, I was going to get the truth from Datura herself.

"The next time my brother and cousin and our friend went over to Datura's house to deliver some cactus flowers, I sat up straight at the table and asked her directly: *Do you like it when we come over? Or would you prefer us to set food out on your doorstep and leave you in peace?*

"Datura turned to face me as if seeing me for the first time. *Oh, would you? It's not that I don't like you kids, but would it be okay to just leave things on the step? There's a flat rock out front; you could hide it behind that.*"

"And did your mom find out about it?" Clover said.

"Oh yes. I told her immediately," Alyssum laughed. "I wanted her to see how clever I was, you see. She was outraged, said this wasn't the way we did things. Marched right over to Datura's house that same day to apologize."

"And how did that go?" Clover asked, smiling, remembering her own mother's reactions to hard-headedness.

"Ma came back home looking furious. What we had negotiated with Datura couldn't be undone. You're *going to wait*, she said. *I don't care how long it*

takes. You're going to knock, hide behind the cactus across from her door, and wait until you know for sure that Datura has taken the food. Do you understand me?

"My brother threw up his hands. *What?* he whined. *Why do we have to wait?*

"But my mother said, *Not all of you. Just Alyssum.*"

Clover laughed. "Was that even worse than spending the time in the house?"

"It depends on how you look at it. It was worse in the summer. Especially since I had talked myself out of the opportunity to ask for a drink of water and a quick rest indoors. I ended up making the trip alone most weeks since I was the only one who had to sit around and wait. I went in the cooler mornings or at dusk but always when I knew Datura would be awake and ready to open the door and take in the food or water I had brought her."

"How long did this go on for?" Clover asked.

"Months. But I'm glad now that my mother insisted.

"One day right on the edge of autumn, when the days were starting to cool, I knocked and waited, but Datura didn't come to the door. I knocked over and over again, hiding behind the cactus each time and waiting, but her hand never reached out to grab the food there."

Clover felt herself tensing. It was a good story then, she thought. "What did you do?"

"I didn't know what to do. The other children weren't with me. The door wouldn't open, like there was something stuck behind it. I looked around the cactus and found a high-up ventilation window. I

climbed the long spines of the cactus and pushed my way through the small opening, tumbling to the ground and skinning my knees. I called her name and heard a moaning from another room. I followed the sound to Datura's bedroom.

"I opened the green door and was met with all of Datura's clothing. Not on the floor in piles or something like that. It was floating. Mid-air."

"What do you mean, floating in mid-air?" Clover said. "Hanging up?"

"No, I mean floating," Alyssum said, her hands held up to demonstrate. "Bobbing up and down as if riding a current. Her dresses, her shoes, the blanket from her little bed, and then among these things, Datura herself, floating in the middle of it all, her short hair flung out behind her as if she were under water. Even my own long hair was rising up, my body lifting slightly off the ground.

"*Datura?* I asked again, more panicked by now. She opened her eyes and recognized me, and then everything fell. The little mattress that had been hovering fell to the floor with the blanket and Datura heaped on top. The floating clothes fell into sloppy piles all around.

"*Don't tell*, she said from the mattress, her voice low and choked. *Don't tell anyone what you saw. Please.*

"I remembered my safety training and went over to feel her forehead. She was burning hot.

"*I'm going to get the doctor*, I said. *I'll be right back.*

"*Don't tell*, she insisted. So I told her I wouldn't.

"I didn't tell anyone about what I had seen. My mother checked in on Datura a few times while she

was sick, but I didn't go back until the following week when I came with my regular delivery of food and water. I didn't hide behind the cactus this time. I waited to be let in, even though I knew it wasn't her preference. I told her I thought we should talk this time.

"Datura was looking better, but she greeted me with the same clenched teeth and distracted air I had grown used to seeing with her. I said to her, *I saw, and I didn't tell anyone. You don't have to do anything special for me.*

"Datura looked at me, breathing hard through her clenched teeth. *Oh fine*, she said. And she relaxed back into her chair. As she did, all the things around her started to lift! First the package of food I had brought, then two prickly pears on the counter, then the table itself and the chairs we sat on. Datura let out a long sigh. *That's better*, she said.

"And then something happened that was even more amazing than all the floating things. Datura smiled. A real smile. *Thank you for helping me*, she said. *And thank you for not telling anyone.*

"She explained to me that this had been happening for a long time. That she had to concentrate all her energy on keeping everything down every time someone came to pay her a visit. That it was so draining that she would rather be alone.

"*I don't know why you would hide it*, I said. *I think folks would find it kind of neat, maybe a little odd, but I don't think anyone would fault you for it. And if they did, wouldn't that still be better than being alone all the time?*

"*You think so?* she said.

"*I think you could try.*

"My mother had always been kind to Datura, and I assured her that she would be kind again. But Ma fell to the floor when she saw Datura and then immediately floated up to the middle of the room!" Alyssum cackled, showing all her teeth. "Even though I'd warned her ahead of time! She hadn't believed me I guess. I don't blame her.

"To her credit, it didn't take long for Ma to get used to the idea. I think she saw, like I did, the change that came over Datura, how free she looked, and she hurried to be okay with floating."

"Your Ma sounds like a good, caring person," Clover said.

"She was." Alyssum took a break to drink some tea. "She was a kind person. She cared about everyone. After we brought her in on Datura's secret, Ma told a few more people who invited a few more. Datura was really social it turned out, when she wasn't so afraid of what people would think of her."

Alyssum took more sips of her tea, her gaze still fixed somewhere far away.

"It's a beautiful story," Clover said, picking her words carefully. "A neighbor in need, a community coming to support her."

"But?"

"But how will anyone believe it to be true when it's clearly impossible?"

Alyssum broke into a wide grin, wrinkles appearing at the corners of her eyes and mouth. "I knew you'd say that. Does it matter if it's true? It will still make a good story for your festival."

"It matters to me."

"Well, it is true. If you ever make it to visit the folk in the desert, they'll tell you just as I have."

"But how is it possible? How could she float?"

"Now, that I can't tell you. Some things will always be a mystery. But doesn't that make stories like these just a little bit sweeter? The not knowing?"

Clover bit her lip, pondering.

"Is there anything else you'd need to know for your story?"

"I suppose—" Clover stopped and scratched her head. Was this really the story she wanted to tell? Would she call it a piece of imagination or a story of truth? And did it matter? "I suppose it could be nice to know what kind of plant a datura is."

"That's right. You've probably never seen one! Datura is a magical plant. Big beautiful flowers, white and bell-shaped. Spiky globed fruits. You should never eat them, but there are medicines that can be made from them. Some of those medicines will make you see things that aren't there."

Clover raised her eyebrow. "And these plants grow around the desert?"

"Goodness!" Alyssum said. "That's not what happened! I knew Datura for years before I started my travels! We spent full afternoons together floating up by her ceiling. I remember it so vividly, the weightlessness of it, like floating in a pond. You can't imagine such things."

"You don't think hallucinations are the more likely explanation?"

"Group hallucinations?"

"Why not?"

"Forgive me for saying so, but you don't know what you're talking about."

Who cared if it was true or make believe?

The story was mostly formed in her mind by the time Clover started back for home—"Datura of the Desert," she'd call it.

It would be hard not to tell the story to Dandelion right when she got home. And to find a place to practice it without her overhearing. She might have to practice in her head, only hearing it out loud when she stood before the whole settlement in one month's time.

But this was a good one—a story to make the listeners wonder about it long after they'd heard it, a tale to keep the settlement warm through the cold months. Clover imagined herself trying to drink tea with Datura while both of them hovered up to the ceiling in a great green room. Datura's wide smile as her copper hair floated out behind her. Laughter echoing through the spiny green cactus.

Clover took a deep breath and started rehearsing in her head.

All this happened in the desert, she started. *Where a woman named Datura lived alone in a tough, spiny plant, with no one to visit her expect for the children.*

⁂

Alicia Adams lives in the woods in California with her spouse, young daughter, and cat. She is currently absorbed in writing stories about tiny people with expansive inner worlds. You can find her through her website at aliciaadamswriting.com or chat with her on Mastodon at @alicia@wandering.shop.

Q&A with Alicia Adams

The following questions were posed by Catherine Yeates, author of *Sky*, and are answered by Alicia Adams about their story *Datura of the Desert.*

This was a lovely addition to the series you've been writing, and I have a soft spot for the "story within a story" structure. Another piece in the series, "Out of the Rain," uses an outsider perspective to tell the story of Coriander and Hyssop's family. When you're writing, how do you choose which character tells the story?

> Thank you so much for reading multiple stories in this series! I am delighted!
>
> I also enjoy framed narratives when I encounter them in literature. They (hopefully) give the reader two points of interest, and sometimes they allows for extra fantasy or adventure, like in *The Princess Bride*. I have very pointedly kept magic out of the everyday lives

of the folk, but a story the folk tell can have magic without breaking those rules.

"Out of the Rain" was a folk adaptation of "Goin' Into the House," a public domain story by J.S. Fletcher. "Goin' Into the House" had the right tone for a folk story, and that's partially because the reader gets to experience the story of the couple from the perspective of the narrator who is an outside observer. I really like that.

I have known for a while that Clover would tell a story at the fall festival. There are lots of stories she could have told. I took to waking up a little before my alarm in the mornings and wondering which story Clover would tell.

One thing I particularly enjoyed was the role Clover and other storytellers play in this world—that sharing stories is something genuinely meaningful and necessary within their community. I liked the line that none of the stories Clover had practiced so far were "warm enough to keep the settlement going through a hard winter." This story and the previous one, "To the Scribe Who Reads This," both address the role of oral storytelling and writing in these communities. Do you think writing will eventually become more widespread among the folk?

I can't speak to the future of the folk yet. Even if I answered this question now, I've learned that nothing stays still and where I expect it while I'm writing. Luckily, there's a joy to that chaos.

But I'm overjoyed that the importance of stories and writing is coming through! I wanted the scribe and the storyteller to have roles that were incredibly important to the settlement (whether or not they're always recognized as such). Clover doesn't think of herself as brave, like Dandelion, but she has an important role in her community, and she takes it very seriously.

I think that the way the sense of scale is portrayed in this series is very thoughtfully done. Both scribes and travelers expand how the characters in this community experience and understand the wider world. Would you like to travel if you lived in this world? Do you like to travel in real life?

Thank you! I think the people who travel in this world are so brave. Even if you're not riding a bird like Sugar Maple ("You're Always Welcome Here"—Issue 2), just making the two-day walk between settlements is an adventure and a risk. As in my real life, I think I would find a balance between the safety and comfort of home and the call to adventure.

My adventuring has slowed since having a child. We take small, cozy adventures by visiting national parks and hiking here in our mountains. But every once in a while I surprise my partner by showing him the vast research I've done on how to work as a cook in Antarctica or the different places to camp along the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT).

A theme I liked that has been consistent throughout the series is hospitality. In this story, you have Clover bringing food for Alyssum, and Alyssum bringing food for Datura. It's nice to see these communities in which the residents take care of each other. Are there experiences in your life that informed how you write about hospitality in this series?

> In middle school a teacher told me a story. I forget most of the details, but the main point survives. A person is traveling through hell with a guide. Everyone is emaciated and starving, and the guide explains that they were given spoons that were too long to reach their mouths, so no one can eat. When they travel through heaven, everyone looks happy and well fed, but the traveler sees that they have the same spoons. He asks the guide about it, and the guide explains, "They feed each other."
>
> I was not exactly religious (and there are logical issues with this story), but I understood this to mean that you can make a heaven or a hell out of the same circumstances by supporting and helping each other or not.
>
> Have I learned this in real life? I'm working on it. But I wanted to make an idyllic community for the folk, and to me that meant there had to be a lot of community support. Children are brought up to support their community, and that support continues through their lives.

A Lingering Light

By Kit Calvert

All week, Ash had tailed his mother around town. She'd draped lanterns from the market stalls, from the beams supporting the crooked tallhouses; she'd knotted their strings underneath the moon-like lamps that already lined the Mossyport streets. Ash had kept the ribbons safe, tucked away in his coat pocket. "It's a very important job," said his mother. "Lord Foss said he wants this place lit bright enough to rival the stars."

The festival day came quickly; crisp and cool. Throughout the darkening afternoon, Ash and his mother had coaxed life to each lantern with a dribbling wax candle and its gentle flame. They were warming the stiffness out of their fingers with their hearth's heat when Ash's ma came home from her orchard-shift.

"Town's so bright, I could hardly tell that the sun'd gone down," she said. "Almost burned out my eyesight."

"Ash and I did the lanterns, this year," said Ash's mother.

Ash took in his ma and decided that she did have a dazed look about her edges. "Sorry, love," she said, folding her bones against his mother's, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "Harvest has been so busy."

Ash's mother had become very quiet, and so Ash announced, "I helped!"

His ma reached out and ruffled Ash's hair under her palm. "I'm sure you did, smidge. Hope you didn't burn your fingers. Now, are you ready to go?"

He walked through the festival clutching his mother's and ma's hands. The people heaved against each other. He caught the scent of fried apples in the air. When his ma noticed him breathing it in, she fished in her trouser pockets for pennies, and came back with a box of syrupy apple fritters. As the three of them ate, they were warmed by the scarlet fingers of the fire-eaters' breath; by the cinnamon, heating their bellies.

The dusk became darker, and his ma left again. This time, she returned with two mugs of something foamy and spicy-smelling that she said that only those grown enjoyed. His mother protested, but Ash was more interested in the crowd: dipping his head this way and that, trying to see through the slender gaps between legs as more and more people gathered around them. His ma picked him up and settled him atop a nearby stall-table—the owner waving his hand in agreement lazily, too busy tapping his feet to the humming lyre-strings, too busy watching the people

dancing. It was only then that his mother took the other mug.

Ash was the first one to spot the lights moving in the distance. At first, he thought they were simply a part of the revel. Last year Cogs had sent great splashes of colour into the sky, which—when pressed—his ma had called fireworks. The boy had thought them magic, but his mother had explained that it was something called chemistry, and mixed tiny spoons of strong-smelling powder together in their fireplace to show him. He was grown enough now to know that magic wasn't real, whatever his ma said. But the lights shifted in an odd way, and part of him wondered whether Cogs had worked out how to do magic after all.

His mother had taught him how to pick through ideas, and so it wasn't long before his mind settled on another, more rational explanation: fireflies, great swarms of them. But then again, his mother had told him so many times that fireflies were summer creatures, and that they slept the rest of the year.

He ran out of ideas, after that. The lights that night were as much a mystery to him as Cogs' lights had been, when he was smaller. His mother was busy peering at a table of glass ornaments, and so he tugged at his ma's jacket-cloth with his sticky black-syrup fingers, starry-eyed. "Look," he said. "Over there."

His ma's mouth was wreathed with foam, which briefly made him and then her laugh. "Where?" she said, once she'd wiped it off on her cuff.

He pointed. "Up near where the hill meets the sky. Can you see it?"

His ma peered against the lantern-light, and then took him further down the road until the festival's noises ebbed away. She knelt next to him. Ash heard her breath catch in preparation to let him down.

"No, *no*," he said, pressing his sticky forefinger to her mouth. Her eyes widened, but she nodded. "Wait. Be patient." It was something he had heard his mother say, and he felt his ma grin against his hand. She curled herself around him, tucking his cheek against hers; pointed his chin up skywards, with hers.

With the light quietened, it became clear what Ash had seen: a star, dropping out the sky. As he stood with his ma, its sister-star followed. Ash had read about falling stars in his mother's books, but falling was a poor word to describe the path it took. The star soared, leaving an incandescent ghost behind. Where one fell, there came another; and then, slowly, another.

"I do see it," she said. "Shall we go up to the hill-top, to have a look?"

While his ma went to fetch his mother, Ash wiped syrupy streaks on his trousers.

"You're sure you saw something?" said Ash's mother, when she came. "You don't think it was Cogs, preparing something for later?"

"It wasn't Cogs," Ash protested. "I promise."

"It wasn't Cogs," said Ash's ma. "I saw it, too."

Ash's mother smiled one of her tiny, secret smiles. Even behind her glasses, Ash saw the conspiratorial glint in her eyes. "It may not exactly be something a

chemist would know about, but we would be poor scientists indeed if we didn't at least go and investigate."

His ma heaved Ash atop her shoulders, and his fingers knit tight in the soft shear of her hair. His mother went ahead, skirts bunched up in her hands as she navigated the uneven ground.

"Slow down, Zin." Ash's ma's voice rumbled against his belly. "I'm worried you'll trip. That cider was stronger than I expected."

"Don't pretend that it wasn't you who bought it," said Ash's mother.

Soon enough, they stood at the top of the hill, looking down into the valley neighbouring theirs. The lake there was always a mirror, but now it was also limned with tiny golden bursts of light: the other nearby towns celebrating the festival, made miniature by the distance. With their backs to their own lanterns, they could see even the tiniest pinprick stars weaving their ways through the indigo-black sky.

Ash's ma took off her jacket and spread it on the ground; the three of them huddled together in the quiet and watched the starfall. Ash was pleased when he picked out his ma's favourite constellation: the twelve stars that made up the comet-wyrm's body, and the four stars that made up the comet-wyrm's head.

"There's a machine in the city where you can look at the stars up close," said Ash's mother, after a time.

"How?" he said. His fingers had wrapped around the red rope of her plait without him noticing; an old habit, from when he was very small.

"I'm not sure," she said. She didn't ease her hair out of his grip, but instead enveloped her hand over his. "Maybe it has big circles of glass, stacked atop each other—like your magnifying glass, only more complicated."

Ash's ma let out a long, low breath. "Your mother is very clever," she said.

"I don't know that much about it," said Ash's mother. She pressed her cheek against the top of Ash's head, and he could feel that it was warm. "But maybe, sometime, we can go and find out."

Ash had been about to say yes—that he'd like that, a *lot*—but his ma made a sharp noise, drawing him under her arm. Then he saw it: the pale streak in the sky, so much closer than the others. It looked like nothing more than a worm, but a worm with a great rock at its head and a tail made of wobbling light, sweeping down towards the lake and plunging into the water. The water seethed with starfire—blue, yellow, indigo—as the star looped around the perimeter and then broke the surface, soaring back up again into the sky.

"I thought stars fell if they left the sky," said Ash's mother. "I didn't know they went back up again." Another came down to the water, glimmering across the lake bed.

"They're not stars," said Ash's ma, breathless. "It's the comet-wyrm's children, come to visit us." And then, looking down at Ash's mother, "Come to see the lights. Your lights."

"Cogs' lights, more likely," said his mother. It was only then that Ash took it in: the distant *rat-at-at-at*

sounds of Cogs' show, the colourful scent of the smoke.

"Oh!" cried Ash's mother, clapping her hands to her mouth. "We're missing the fireworks! I'm so sorry, Ash—we'll rush down and try to catch the end—"

"I'm not having you break an ankle in the dark," said Ash's ma. "Sorry, kid. You'll see more of Cogs' wizardry in your life, I'm sure of it."

But Ash was puzzled at the thought that the fireworks were better than *this*. "It's alright!" he said, as another of the comet-wyrm's children came down to dance. "Look! We're making friends."

Later, when the comet-wyrm's children had gone back to the sky, Ash found himself a warm weight in his ma's arms. He shifted with every step she took; jolted when a rogue pebble went unexpectedly under the sole of his ma's shoe. A very quiet but very rude word came out of her mouth. Normally, he would have told her off, but even though he willed it his mouth didn't seem to want to open.

His ma's voice rasped against him. "You both did do a good job on those lanterns," she said. "Really. He's so good, helping you with your work. So clever, listening to your stories. We'll need to get him a little pair of goggles to match yours, for a solstice-gift. Something useful for an apprentice alchemist."

"He'd like that, I think," said his mother.

There was a quietness, for a time, and then uncertainty: "Do you think he'll ever be impressed by anything I tell him?"

"Oh, *hush*," said Ash's mother. "You insisted that we take him up the hill, and what a wonder we saw! And I know those were your apples that went into the fritters."

"They were."

Just before Ash fell asleep, he heard his mother again. "So, be soothed by that. You're his world. And when you're ready to stop grumbling, maybe you can help me figure out what lanterns to set out next year."

"For next year?"

"Of course."

"What's happening next year?"

A smile came into his mother's voice. "Don't we want the comet-wyrm's children to come back?"

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Kit Calvert (she/her) is a Scottish speculative fiction writer and scientist, currently based in Edinburgh. Her work weaves together nature that's wild and weird, domestic magics, and unapologetic queer joy. When she's not writing, she enjoys foraging for treasures in rockpools, painting, and consuming an irresponsible amount of soup. For more information about her work, visit kitcalvert.com.

Q&A with Kit Calvert

The following questions were posed by Katarina Dulude, author of *A Nettle Sting, a Witches Hut, and Something Unexpected*, and are answered by Kit Calvert about their story *A Lingering Light*.

I loved the warmth of the festival atmosphere between the lights and the food and drinks— did any particular holidays influence your story? Do you have a favorite holiday and, if so, what makes it special to you?

> I try to keep the fictional holidays in my stories distinct from real-world ones, so I'm careful not to base them too directly on any particular celebration. But I did want to capture the moment in winter when the world is cold and dark, and then suddenly the lights come on and everything feels warmer and more alive. My favourite holiday is probably Christmas, less because of the specific traditions and more so because the

> decorations and lights often help create that atmosphere that banishes the gloom.

Ash, his mother, and his ma are a family unit that is both sweet and realistic-feeling — for these dynamics, did you draw at all from your own experiences, either as a parent or from your own childhood?

> I'd say for that element of this piece, rather than drawing from my personal experiences, what I was most inspired by was seeing the way my friends parent their young children - how things don't always go perfectly, and a lot of it is just muddling through and doing your best rather than trying to get everything exactly right.

There are many details that make the world feel very lived in, and I found myself curious about characters we only get mentions of like Cogs and the world's mythos like the comet wyrm— do you intend to expand on this piece and these characters?

> I usually write one-shots, so I don't typically expand on characters or the world beyond a single story. That being said, I love when I can bring back characters and world elements in a way that feels organic, so if inspiration strikes, I wouldn't rule it out! For now, I focused on giving just enough detail to make the world feel alive.

A Nettle Sting, a Witch's Hut, and Something Unexpected

By Katarina Dulude

Ozana had always had a skill for foraging. Her mother would say that Ozana would call and the nuts and mushrooms and berries would obediently appear before her. It was not so simple as that, but it wasn't terribly far off. She knew the Wood—they had long been friends, she often said—despite its reputation for changing when you weren't paying attention. The trick was to not let it phase you, rather than to try to control it, to let it guide you. The Wood was known to be tricksy, some even called it magic, but to Ozana each tree was a being like the villagers, the squirrels and the wolves, any other, and she moved through the Wood with the understanding that their relationship was a reciprocal one. She trusted that she would always find, if not what she was after, certainly what she needed.

The townsfolk whispered about her sometimes, especially when she wore her *tată*'s trousers to go out

into the forest, as she did today. *Vrăjitoare*. Witch. Still, they didn't dare say anything to her face, or to her *mamă*, *tată*, or her sisters. When nobody else could find chestnuts in midwinter, Ozana managed with ease, and always returned with an abundance to go around.

It was not yet winter, but the autumn had been unusually cold, and there was a nip of frost in the air. Because daylight was limited this time of year, Ozana, bundled in layers of scarves and set out with the dawn while her family still asleep.

The sky was a haze of pinkish gold as she trekked the dirt path through the village that led to the Wood. Though she saw the smoke rise from a few chimneys, the village was still, the singing birds her only companions so early in the day. Later, there would be a market in the town square, where her *mamă* would sell the barley her family grew, along with the honey fungus Ozana had gleaned two days before.

As Ozana approached the Wood, she couldn't help but feel as though she was being watched. She turned back to the village, but it was still as ever. She shook her head, and began her day.

By noon, Ozana had collected chicken of the woods, figwort, and juniper berries in her woven basket. It was a good haul, but something about the day felt off. There were a few times while she was gathering that she heard twigs breaking behind her, but when she looked, she didn't spot any animals. She'd

been unable to shake the suspicion she had felt that morning that there was somebody, or something, following her.

Still, whenever she looked, she couldn't find anyone. It was almost like the Wood was hiding it from her. That was a strange thought. She shook her head once more, and broke for a lunch of elderberry jam on thick, crusty brown bread that her mother had baked the previous morning, washing it down with the water from a nearby brook. After she had eaten her fill, she pressed onwards, into the deepest parts of the forest, where she had found truffles the previous year.

The uncanny feeling of being watched persisted as she collected dock leaves. Even so, she carried on, and after harvesting chickweed she came across—between this and the figwort, she feared the winter would be one of illnesses—she decided it was best to turn back. She was deep enough in the Wood that it was dark thanks to the tree cover, but even still, it seemed to be getting darker before it ought. Through the tall tree leaves, she peered up and saw the sky was beginning to turn gray. Ozana had no interest in being caught in the forest for the first snow of the season, so she began to turn back quickly.

As she did, she heard movement: first, a scampering away, and then a cry. Nothing could have prepared Ozana for what she found. Caught in a patch of stinging nettle was Sabina, the tailor's daughter. Of course, though she might be daughter of the tailor, Sabina never failed to remind any of the other villagers that her mother was the niece of a lord, and

every Yule she returned from the city with brocaded gowns far too opulent to have any useful purpose in the village. Even now, in the midst of the woods, she wore a thick coat of fabric more sumptuous than anything Ozana could imagine traipsing into the wood with.

"Oww!" she cried. Though most of her body was covered by her gloves, long skirts, coat, scarf, and hat, one particularly tall nettle had managed to catch her neck. Though Ozana felt sympathy, she also knew from her sisters that Sabina had repeated, if not started, the whispers—*vrăjitoare*—about her and thus, a small part of her was amused seeing the stuck-up so-and-so caught in the nettles.

Still, Ozana begrudgingly offered the other girl her hands. Sabina hesitated before accepting them. "Slowly," Ozana added. "Be mindful not to let another one sting you."

Carefully, Sabina extricated herself from the patch of nettle and brushed herself off. Her long, glossy red hair, which had undoubtedly been braided meticulously when she left this morning, now had some leaves in it. Ozana moved to pick them out, but the other girl jerked away before realizing what Ozana was doing. Upon realizing, her face turned nearly as red as her hair, and she plucked them out herself.

Finally, Ozana couldn't help but ask, "Do you mind telling me what you're doing here?"

"Can't I take a walk in the wood if I want to?"

"I mean, yes, but ..." *But I've never seen you do it and you clearly don't have much sense, walking into stinging nettle like you did.*

Sabina glared at her. "Anyways, I think I've had well enough. I will be going home." However, she didn't move. Instead, she stood, watching Ozana expectantly and confirmed for Ozana what she had already begun to suspect: this had been who had been following her all morning and afternoon. The only question was *why?*

Indeed, knowing Sabina was the one following her made Ozana less nervous, but no less confused. It was tempting to linger here in the Wood, knowing Sabina wouldn't know how to find her own way back. It was clear enough Sabina had taken up this endeavor because she expected to return home safely by following Ozana, and she appeared to have sense enough to not attempt returning home on her own. As much as the idea of leading the other girl on a wild goose chase around the Wood amused her, it was likely snow was coming and Ozana wanted to be back before it did.

"You're in luck," Ozana said. "I am too."

To this, Sabina had no reply, but waited expectantly for Ozana to lead her out of the Wood. Amused and baffled in equal measure, Ozana gazed at her for a moment before she began walking back. Sabina followed and they trudged onward, slower than Ozana would have liked, for the wind had begun to pick up. It was half an hour of trudging before the first flakes of snow began to come down. Now Sabina was out of her depth, certainly, but Ozana knew that

she wasn't a fool. She knew what that meant just as well as Ozana did.

"Will we make it back in time?" Sabina asked with a forced disinterest that didn't fool Ozana in the least.

Ozana did not care to coddle Sabina's fears with any false promises. "I don't know."

"You don't know? I thought you knew these woods like the back of your palm."

"The Wood is always changing. I accept that and trust that if I move with it, I will end up where I need to be."

Sabina raised her eyebrows. "*Prostii.*" Hogwash.

Ozana shrugged, not particularly interested in carrying on the conversation any further. The snow had gotten heavier. She was not convinced they would make it home that night. What's more, however, what struck her was that the Wood had almost certainly concealed Sabina from her this morning. There was no way that girl was stealthy enough to have managed to have remained unseen without its aid. *That means*, she thought, *it wanted to put us together.* Specifically, it wanted to trap them in the snow together. She was concerned about the snow, a little, anyway. The Wood was not evil and she did not believe, if it were to snow heavily and if she were to be stuck in the Wood for the night, that it would not provide. What perplexed Ozana was Sabina. It all came down to Sabina, Sabina who never entered the forest, who wrinkled her nose when she saw mud splattered along the hems of women's skirts, some-

how managing always to keep her own immaculate, Sabina who called Ozana a witch.

Sabina, who was, frankly, unpleasant and unwelcome company, but company it seemed Ozana would be stuck with. As it happened, Sabina was beginning to fall behind as the snow began to cluster on the earth. She didn't speak, but her sharp jaw was clenched, and she seemed to shiver in spite of that warm coat from the city. They carried on for another ten minutes in silence, before finally, Sabina broke it.

"Tell me the truth: are we to be stranded in the woods, in the snow?"

Ozana shrugged once more. "It seems probable."

"'It seems probable,'" Sabina repeated, scowling. "How can you be so blasé about this?"

"Practice," Ozana answered.

"Right." Sabina glowered.

It was another few minutes before finally, not far off, there was a stone cottage. Ozana breathed a sigh of relief, the air coloring white with her breath. It was small, barely more than a hut, with a thatched roof and ivy growing along one side of it. There was no smoke from any fire—more likely than not, it had been long abandoned and the Wood had lead them to it for refuge.

"We'll spend the night in there," Ozana said, nodding ahead. Sabina took a good look at it for the first time, snowflakes were getting thicker and it was becoming more and more difficult to see what was ahead.

"No." Sabina shook her head. "No, I'm not going in there."

"What do you mean, you're not going in there?" Ozana retorted. Not much sense, indeed.

"A hut in the middle of the woods. That's practically asking it to grow chicken legs and carry us off!"

Ozana couldn't help it, she snorted. "Are you afraid of Baba Yaga? Remind me how old you are."

"Old enough!" Sabina snapped back, her face flushed furiously. "I've heard what's said of these woods, that they're magic. I don't think it's unreasonable to be cautious."

"Almost as unreasonable as it is to sit outside in the cold and freeze to death," replied Ozana. "But then again, suit yourself."

"Fine, but if there *is* a witch—"

"Oh Sabina, don't you remember?" Ozana said, her lips curving into a bitter smile. "The only witch here is me." Ozana met Sabina's eyes and Sabina had the decency to blush bright red. At least she felt some shame when confronted about it. Indeed, Ozana had seen Sabina blush more in one afternoon than she previously had in her entire life. Then again, she supposed she had never spent much time with her.

Without another word, Sabina marched ahead toward the hut. Ozana followed.

They were fortunate. Whoever had lived here was long gone, but they had left dry wood by the fireplace, and it was not long before Ozana was able to get a fire burning. Ozana surveyed there was not much for food, save a large tin of oats, but this would

more than suffice. Now, the two girls cuddled up close by it, as far apart from one another as they could be while sharing a large patchwork quilt they found near the cot in the rear corner of the cottage. For several minutes, neither spoke. Then:

"Everyone says it, you know. Not just me."

Ozana frowned. "Says what?"

"*Vrăjitoare*. That you're a witch," Sabina answered simply.

"I don't care what everyone says," Ozana replied. So long as her *mamă*, *tată*, Mirel, and Ylenia loved her, it mattered very little what anyone else thought.

"But you care what I say?" Sabina asked, her grey eyes gazing at her curiously.

"No," Ozana answered bluntly. She couldn't help but add, "Whatever gave you that impression?"

"I—" Sabina started, then shook her head. "Never mind." She stood. "I'm going to see if there's any tea leaves. We could use some of the snow to make tea over the fire." As she turned, she grimaced, the nettle sting still angry and red on her neck.

Ozana sighed. "Come here."

"What?"

"Sit back down." With some reluctance, Sabina did, and Ozana rummaged through her picnic basket. She pulled out the dock leaves. Sabina watched, suspicious. "Come closer." Again, Sabina did so with some reluctance, and it seemed to Ozana that she was holding her breath entirely. Ozana couldn't help but roll her eyes—did this silly girl really believe she was a witch? Still, she took one of the dock leaves and

rubbed it gently on the raised pink flesh on Sabina's neck, where the nettle stung her.

"Oh," Sabina gasped. "It's—it's cooling."

"It's dock leaf," Ozana explained. "It can be used to treat nettles. It can also be used in place of cabbage when making *sarmalele*. You should leave it on your neck for now—it will help."

"I—" Sabina stopped herself. "Thank you."

Ozana shrugged. "I had it. You needed it."

All went quiet again. For about half an hour, the two girls did naught but stare into the flickering orange flames, and Ozana's eyelids had begun to grow heavy when Sabina spoke.

"I followed you."

Groggy, Ozana blinked her dark eyes back open. "I figured."

"I—well, nobody else in town is able to find half of what you do. I wanted to know how you did it." Her cheeks might have just been rosy from the fire, but Ozana was not convinced.

"So you thought to follow me?"

"Well, yes." She raised her eyebrows as if to say, *And what about it?*

Once again, Ozana was both bemused and baffled. "I have a question for you," she replied.

"Yes?" Sabina replied, her voice taking on a dignified air that did not befit the situation.

"Why didn't you just *ask* me?"

"Ask you?" Sabina repeated. "I mean ... would you have said yes?"

Would Ozana have? She liked her time in the Wood by herself. She liked that she was able to pro-

vide for her family and her village in a way nobody else could. She didn't particularly wish to share these walks with anyone else, least of all the tailor's snobby daughter. Still ...

"I don't know. Probably."

"Right." Sabina didn't believe her. Perhaps rightfully. Still, it annoyed Ozana.

"If you really wanted to come along, I would have taken you with me," she insisted.

"Sure, *draga mea*." Sabina's voice dripped with sarcasm.

Ozana frowned. "Well," she said dryly. "Did you get all you bargained for?"

"I got a nettle sting and a night in a shabby old witch hut with someone as surly and oblivious as she is supposed to be observant."

Ozana's mouth had opened, ready to make a retort, but the last part of that sentence puzzled her into silence. What did Sabina mean that Ozana was oblivious? Oblivious to what? With irritation, she realized her lack of understanding reinforced that she *was* oblivious, and that vexed her more than anything had all day. Well, she wasn't going to admit it, anyways.

Unfortunately for her, it didn't seem to matter. "You're still clueless, aren't you?" Sabina said, her turn to be amused.

Ozana glared. "I don't know what you're talking about—and, frankly, I don't care what you're talking about. Whatever it is, it doesn't mat—"

Ozana's sentence was cut off as Sabina leaned forward and pulled Ozana's face towards her own soft,

pink rosebud lips. And then they were on Ozana's lips, hungry and demanding, and Sabina's fingers were in Ozana's nut brown hair, and Ozana's hands were around Sabina's waist and her hips, gripping tight.

It is safe to say that Ozana and Sabina kept warm that night, in the small hut in the Wood. The following morning, the sun rose bright and golden, casting a hazy pinkish glow upon the sky and the thick layers of snow that coated the trees and the land. Ozana woke early—it was her habit. She gazed down at Sabina beside her, red hair splayed like a princess, breath rising and falling delicately, a bit drool at the corner of her mouth. Ozana smiled. As always, the Wood had brought her to where she needed to be.

Some hours later, Sabina rose to the smell of porridge. After breaking their fast, Ozana and Sabina set out for the village once more, and this time, the Wood guided them home.

⁂

Katarina Dulude (she/they) is an American writer, actor, and photographer based in Glasgow. They graduated with an Mlitt in Fantasy Literature from the University of Glasgow in 2023. She has four academic publications, has previously published short stories in *Scattered Flock Literary Journal* and *Shoreline Literary Journal*, and her play, "The Wolf Sickness," was workshopped last summer by Tired Horses Theatre. Her research interests include neo-Victorian fantasy, the Gothic, queer and feminist studies, and children's literature. Most of all, she is interested in how exploring the past through fiction might help us understand our present and realize a better future.

Q&A with Katarina Dulude

The following questions were posed by Kit Calvert, author of *A Lingering Light*, and are answered by Katerina Dulude about their story *A Nettle Sting, a Witches Hut, and Something Unexpected.*

I loved how grounded this story felt with all the specific details of Ozana's plant gathering— they made her world feel so real. What kind of research or personal experience went into creating that authenticity?

> I am so deeply far from an expert, but this year, my wife and I have begun a small garden, so I've been reading more about plants and gardens in general, and also have been much more attentive to these types of details in the literature I read. Immediately prior to writing this piece, I'd been reading Nicola Griffith's Hild, which while set in the British Isles, has a lot of overlap with plants set in Romania, where my story

loosely is set, and so I utilised a lot of the plants I'd read about from there (for example, chickweed) that I confirmed are also found in eastern Europe. Though I've read it less recently, Naomi Novik's Uprooted was another inspiration for the piece, particularly in relation to foraging as well as a magical wood. Foraging is something I would love to gain more practical experience doing, but as it stands, most of my research has been a combination of noting what's been utilised in other texts, what I've learned from gardening this year (especially speaking to folks at the garden centre!), and Internet research.

We see the beginning of a relationship in this story. Do you ever imagine what comes next for your characters after we leave them? And if so, what do you think lies ahead for Ozana and Sabina?

To be perfectly honest, I wrote this piece as a short story without a great deal of intention to expand it. It's primarily a romance, with aspects of magical realism, but I'm not much of a romance writer as an A. Plot. I tend to write character-driven pieces, but usually for me, romance is still secondary, and thus, if I were to in any way expand this in the future, I think I would need to introduce a larger plot and see how that impacts their characters and relationship dynamic. In the event I don't, I have my own thoughts about Ozana and Sabina's future, but I prefer to leave my endings somewhat

ambiguous— I like to give readers the opportunity to imagine what comes next for themselves.

The forest you described had such a rich sense of atmosphere. Where's your favourite place to write, and does that environment inspire your stories - either this one, or others you've worked on?

I no longer have access to one of my favourite places to write: the postgraduate humanities study spot at the University of Glasgow, where I did my master's degree. Two years after my degree, and I still miss it. It was relatively unknown compared to popular study spots like the library, and thus, rarely busy, especially on weekends, when you had to enter a code to enter the building at all. This cozy loft area was two stories, almost always quiet, at the top floor of the law building on campus, kitted out with a refrigerator and kettle, so you could store your lunch and make tea to keep you going. Specifically, my favorite spot was a comfortable turquoise chair that I would position in front of a window where I could look out and see the university tower, or even open to breathe in fresh air. I love to write, but doing it on a laptop and doing it in nature are not the most compatible, so any spot with a view of outside and, all the better, fresh air coming through, is an ideal spot for me, and the images and sounds I hear in spots like these often end up working their way into my pieces.

Of the Three Seekers

By William Morris

This poem is in the public domain. It was originally published in January of 1884.

There met three knights on the woodland,
And the first was clad in silk array:
The second was dight in iron and steel,
But the third was rags from head to heel.
"Lo, now is the year and the day come round
When we must tell what we have found."
The first said: "I have found a king
Who grudgeth no gift of anything."
The second said: "I have found a knight
Who hath never turned his back in fight."
But the third said: "I have found a love
That Time and the World shall never move."

Whither away to win good cheer?
"With me," said the first, "for my king is near."
So to the King they went their ways;
But there was a change of times and days.

"What men are ye," the great King said,
"That ye should eat my children's bread?
My waste has fed full many a store,
And mocking and grudge have I gained therefore.
Whatever waneth as days wax old.
Full worthy to win are goods and gold."

Whither away to win good cheer?
"With me," said the second, "my knight is near.
So to the knight they went their ways,
But there was a change of times and days.
He dwelt in castle sure and strong,
For fear lest aught should do him wrong.
Guards by gate and hall there were,
And folk went in and out in fear.
When he heard the mouse run in the wall,
"Hist!" he said, "what next shall befall?
Draw not near, speak under your breath,
For all new-comers tell of death.
Bring me no song nor minstrelsy,
Round death it babbleth still," said he.
"And what is fame and the praise of men,
When lost life cometh not again?"

Whither away to seek good cheer?
"Ah me!" said the third, "that my love were anear!
Were the world as little as it is wide,
In a happy house should ye abide.
Were the world as kind as it is hard,
Ye should behold a fair reward."

So far by high and low have they gone,
They have come to a waste was rock and stone.

But lo, from the waste, a company
Full well bedight came riding by;
And in the midst, a queen, so fair,
That God wrought well in making her.

The first and second knights abode
To gaze upon her as she rode,
Forth passed the third with head down bent,
And stumbling ever as he went.
His shoulder brushed her saddle-bow;
He trembled with his head hung low.
His hand brushed o'er her golden gown,
As on the waste he fell adown.
So swift to earth her feet she set,
It seemed that there her arms he met.
His lips that looked the stone to meet
Were on her trembling lips and sweet.
Softly she kissed him cheek and chin,
His mouth her many tears drank in.
"Where would'st thou wander, love," she said,
"Now I have drawn thee from the dead?"
"I go my ways," he said, "and thine
Have nought to do with grief and pine."
"All ways are one way now," she said,
"Since I have drawn thee from the dead."
Said he, "But I must seek again
Where first I met thee in thy pain:
I am not clad so fair," said he,
"But yet the old hurts thou may'st see.
And thou, but for thy gown of gold,
A piteous tale of thee were told."
"There is no pain on earth," she said,

"Since I have drawn thee from the dead."
"And parting waiteth for us there,"
Said he, "as it was yester-year."
"Yet first a space of love," she said,
"Since I have drawn thee from the dead."
He laughed; said he, "Hast thou a home
Where I and these my friends may come?"
Laughing, "The world's my home," she said,
"Now I have drawn thee from the dead.
Yet somewhere is a space thereof
Where I may dwell beside my love.
There clear the river grows for him
Till o'er its stones his keel shall swim.
There faint the thrushes in their song,
And deem he tarrieth overlong.
There summer-tide is waiting now
Until he bids the roses blow.
Come, tell my flowery fields," she said,
"How I have drawn thee from the dead."

Whither away to win good cheer?
"With me," he said, "for my love is here.
The wealth of my house it waneth not;
No gift it giveth is forgot.
No fear my house may enter in,
For nought is there that death may win.
Now life is little, and death is nought,
Since all is found that erst I sought."

Colophon

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